OPED On Emergency Notification Systems

Timothy Alan Simon: Coordination is vital for warning systems
August 12, 2007

This story is taken from Sacbee / Opinion.

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Published 12:00 am PDT Sunday, August 12, 2007

In many speeches and public statements, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has emphasized the need for Californians to invest in infrastructure, particularly those enhancements required for emergency preparedness. While in California the focus has been primarily on levees, roads and ports, catastrophic events elsewhere such as Hurricane Katrina and the Virginia Tech shootings have magnified the need for compatible and effective early warning systems.

California lives with biblical-scale earthquakes, fires and floods. New convergent technologies enable emergency notification systems to provide information to Californians in innovative ways that can save lives. To realize the promise of these new technologies, government should avoid creating a Tower of Babel composed of cell phones and other communication devices that lack the necessary shared protocols permitting public safety officials to contact and direct those in harm's way.

New communications technologies enable authorities to notify the public in an emergency by a phone call or text message delivered to land-line or wireless devices, including cell phones. For wireless devices, it is possible to send a message targeted to those heading toward a disaster and direct them out of danger. At a campus, workplace or event, it is possible to send a text message, a phone call or an e-mail with a distinctive marking to every threatened individual that warns them of an emergency and directs them to a safe setting.

Unfortunately, what is emerging is not such a unified system. Historically and appropriately, responsibility for sounding the alarm has rested primarily with local government public safety officials. As a result, several California counties have sophisticated systems for sounding the alarm, while others have only rudimentary public notification systems, such as an air raid siren.

Without common communication protocols, manufacturers are developing emergency notification systems that require proprietary software and hardware. Each system remains targeted toward those living in a particular area, resulting in an archipelago of "islands," with people unable to communicate with those who may be across county or municipal boundaries. Consequently, an escape route recommended by one county may lead those fleeing onto a road that is impassible in the next county.

Last year, the California Legislature approved Assembly Bill 2393 by Assemblyman Lloyd Levine, D-Van Nuys, that requires the PUC to examine emergency notification systems and to determine, in consultation with the Office of Emergency Services and the Department of General Services, whether standardized notification systems and protocols should be used in California. The legislation requires that the PUC analyze current myriad technologies and make recommendations to the Legislature for the funding of notification systems and for any necessary statutory changes.

As the assigned commissioner to this proceeding, I have the primary responsibility for presenting this report to the Legislature before March 30. In this process, I have presided over technical workshops involving industry stakeholders, government officials and public policy experts. The result has been

an impressive collection of information to scope the problems that exist in California and define the opportunities afforded by new convergent technologies.

A similar process is also happening at the federal level. Following the Katrina disaster, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) initiated several investigations to ensure that the nation's communications infrastructure can function in emergencies. The FCC has created an advisory committee that will make recommendations about a national wireless emergency alert system in October.

California must devote additional resources to emergency response protocol communications infrastructure. When the recommendations are completed early next year, the Legislature will need to act to fund a new system to ensure that our state's growth is coupled with emergency response capacity derived from new technologies and emerging national improvements.

To do this well, we must ensure that all levels of government and all technologies communicate. Or, simply stated, we must avoid a modern Tower of Babel.